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ABSTRACT

The status of American children is worse today than it has been at any time in the past 50 years. One in every five children in the United States lives in poverty. The incidence of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse has increased dramatically. Many children are physiologically and emotionally damaged or dying from the primary or secondary effects of alcohol and drugs. Nearly 10 million children are emotionally disturbed or mentally ill, with most lacking adequate treatment. One million teenagers have children. Life for minority children is getting worse. School-age children in general are not learning. Children are suffering from an informal policy of national neglect that will have devastating consequences in the years ahead. By the year 2050, a total of 146 million Americans will be in their prime years of productivity. If that number is reduced by millions of adults who are victims of today's neglect, the number of nonproductive, functionally dependent Americans of all ages will exceed the number upon whom they will realistically be able to depend. To remedy this situation, the United States must have a formal social and economic policy that every child is entitled to an opportunity to reach his or her full potential. If children are to be guaranteed opportunities for self-actualization, then their physiological, social, security, and self-worth needs must be met. (AC)

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The Plight of America's Children:

A Plea for Entitlement

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THE PLIGHT OF AMERICA'S CHILDREN:

A PLEA FOR ENTITLEMENT

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THE PLIGHT OF AMERICA'S CHILDREN

There is little doubt that the status of American children today is worse, not better, than it has been at any time during the last 50 or 60 years. Those of us who were around in the 1940's and '50's can probably remember the two or so decades of economic growth and relative prosperity that followed the end of the Second World War. Times were good . . . the livin' was easy . . . at least for the most part. Mothers could opt to stay home and take care of the children . . . fathers could find work . . . and most families could manage fairly comfortably on one income. In fact, during the 1950's and 1960's, American families saw an increase of 25-30% in real income [1]. A home in the suburbs, a station wagon, a television set and a college education for the children became an American dream within reach of millions.

By the early 1970's, however, our dream was beginning to crumble; within 10 years we experienced three recessions and by 1982 the unemployment rate had peaked at a post-Depression high of 11%. [2] Was the fluctuation in the economy in the '70's a forewarning? Frequent, sometimes dramatic changes were almost second nature to the American economic scene. We had, after all, survived the transition from an agricultural economy to one based on the manufacture of goods and materials . . . the ups and downs of two world wars and the Great Depression . . . and the demands that went along with the emergence of a multinational economic system. By the early 1980's, however, we had suffered badly at the hands of stiff foreign competition and were forced to turn to cheaper labor markets abroad for much of our production. Over time, more and more of our manufacturing was moved to other countries and millions of goods and materials-producing jobs were lost. As hundreds and thousands of America's factories closed, two things happened . . . people either joined the ranks of the permanently unemployed or they took new jobs providing services, frequently at only a fraction of their former salaries. The manufacturing industry never really recovered and we experienced still another major change . . . we created a service economy.

Then, like a bolt of lighting, scientific advancements seemingly exploded as the world of applied science and technology took off worldwide. Overnight we saw the

emergence of an almost infinite variety of new technologies. The discovery of things like the silicon chip, laser beams and genetic engineering introduced a new, highly competitive "high-tech" job market. Many of these new jobs require advanced degrees and specialized training . . . they demand new skills . . . they offer new opportunities and careers . . . they open up new horizons and provide new challenges. If the United States is to measure up to its stiff international competition and successfully maintain a seat at the world economic and political table, we must make certain that our children are well prepared for the rigors of the future they are about to face. How well prepared are America's children? Will they be able to compete in the high-tech, fast-paced world of tomorrow? Do our children measure up? Have we done our job well? A close look may prove to be unsettling, perhaps alarming . . . it should . . . the status of America's children is not a pretty picture.

Perhaps the most pervasive feature of the economic and demographic changes of the last two decades has been a widening and deepening of the gap between the rich and the poor in America . . . a gap that is now the greatest it has been in 40 years. As penetrations of poverty reach deeper and deeper into the fabric of our society, the effects on the children of the underclass have become nothing less than a national disgrace. Ann Rosewater, staff director of the House Select Committee on Children, Youth and Families, and Marian Wright Edelman, president, Children's Defense Fund, and others, in 1989 articles in Caring for America's Children, document the shameful status of America's youth.

AMERICA'S CHILDREN ARE NOW THE "POOREST OF THE POOR"

The damaging effect of poverty on our children is nothing less than a disaster of monumental proportions for our entire society. We are loosing the creativity . . . the intellect . . . the talents . . . the contributions of a major segment of our society at a time when our success in maintaining a competitive edge depends, more than ever before, on our ability to maximize and mobilize our national human potential. Yet today, approximately 25% of all babies born in this country are born into poverty [3] . . . yes, *one in every four American children born today doesn't even have a chance*. Surely that doesn't mean poor children are less intelligent or less talented or less capable than their more affluent peers. Certainly not, but it does mean that, compared to other children, poor children are more likely to die at birth or in infancy . . . are 50% more

likely to suffer from a disability or impairment [4] . . . and are more likely to receive poor health care, or none at all, even though they are also likely to have more serious health problems. It also means they are 250% more likely to become teen parents [5]. It means that almost one-half million poor children in this country suffer from malnutrition . . . that in some of our neighborhoods every fourth child we see is hungry every single day of his or her life . . . chronically HUNGRY [6]. It means that in 1987, 36% of all Americans living in poverty were children under the age of 16; 47% were under 21.[7] It means that the children of the underclass are more likely to live in inadequate, unsafe housing, or to be homeless . . . that they are more likely to be labeled learning disabled, to have lower academic achievement scores and to drop out of school . . . it means they are trapped in the hopeless, bottomless pit of poverty, filled with little more than anger and despair and sadness . . . it means they just don't have a chance.

AMERICA'S CHILDREN ARE NOT SAFE . . . THEY ARE NOT PROTECTED . . .

Our children are being battered, sexually assaulted, beaten, and killed . . . they are being neglected and they are being exploited through drugs, pornography and prostitution . . . they are being victimized in numbers that have reached appalling proportions. According to a recent government report on the incidence of child abuse and neglect in this country, over 1.5 million American children were reported as having suffered as a result of abuse and/or neglect in 1986 (a 66% increase over the 1980 incidence rate). Furthermore, a recent study by the University of Southern Maine reported a 5% increase in fatalities in 1988 over 1987 and a *36% increase over 1985*. They estimate that at least 1,225 American children died from abuse or neglect in 1987.[9] Although some children are repeat victims, new children are reported every year and there appears to be no reversal of the trend in sight. As alarming as those figures are, it is generally acknowledged that child protection reports do not begin to document the full extent to which our children are suffering the pain and anguish of repeated physical, sexual and emotional assault . . . the extent to which they will carry the invisible scars of chronic neglect for the rest of their lives.

AMERICA'S CHILDREN ARE PAYING THE PRICE FOR OUR INFATUATION WITH DRUGS AND ALCOHOL

It is estimated that there are now 7 million school age children in this country who live with an alcoholic parent . . . and these children are 4 times more likely than

other children to become addicted to alcohol.[10] In 1985, as many as 11,000 American babies were born with fetal alcohol syndrome . . . the third leading cause of birth defects accompanied by mental retardation.[11] Furthermore, the National Institute on Drug Abuse estimates that over 5 million American women of childbearing age use some type of illegal substance; over 1 million of these women use cocaine and most of them are probably addicted. It has been reported that babies exposed to "crack" cocaine can suffer severe irreversible conditions including "strokes, seizures, paralysis, deformed hearts and lungs, abnormal genital and intestinal organs, physical and learning disabilities and permanent brain damage." [12]. Astoundingly, it is estimated that 375,000 drug exposed babies are born in the United States annually (11% of all newborns!).[13] It has also been documented that prenatal exposure and/or addiction is closely associated with premature births, lower birth weights, and a higher incidence of birth defects and SIDS deaths (sudden infant death syndrome). "Exposed" babies also experience more respiratory and neurological impairments than other children and are believed to be at greater risk of long term developmental disabilities. [14]

In addition to the physiological damage of prenatal addiction, our children are also suffering the secondary effects of the American drug culture. There are now documented links between substance abuse and the abuse, neglect, sexual assault and subsequent placement of children in foster care.[15] Moreover, it is now generally well known that children of IV drug users also run the risk of exposure to the AIDS virus before, during and following birth.

The cost of our drug culture in lost human potential and the physical and emotional suffering of its victims is simply beyond comprehension. The cost in human service dollars, however in somewhat more finite. For example, the State of California estimates that the health care costs alone for the 17,000 to 30,000 drug exposed infants expected to be born in that state this year (1990) will be somewhere between $500 million and $1 billion dollars. [16]

LIFE IS GETTING WORSE FOR BLACK AND OTHER MINORITY CHILDREN IN AMERICA

In increasing numbers minority children are being submerged deeper and deeper into the abyss of America's underclass poor. Marian Wright Edelman

documents the plight of minority children in this country in her article on "children at risk" in Caring for America's Children. She reported that nearly 50% of all black children and 40% of all Hispanic children in America are poor . . . not that white children are immune . . . one white child in five has also been condemned to poverty. Compared with their white counterparts, however, black children are more likely to live in poverty-bound, single parent families . . . they are less likely to receive prenatal care and are twice as likely to be born underweight and premature [17] . . . and, combined with poor health services, are likely to have more frequent and more severe health problems and disabilities. They are more often exposed to violent crime and are more likely to live in substandard housing or to have no homes at all. Black children are twice as likely as white children to die in the first year of life and three times more likely to be *murdered* between the time they enter kindergarten and their 9th birthday.[18]

AMERICA'S CHILDREN ARE, THEMSELVES, HAVING CHILDREN

Tragically, teen pregnancy has almost become a national past-time. This year, one million teenage girls, one out of every ten, will become pregnant.[19] The vast majority of these young mothers are, themselves, mere children ... they are not prepared financially or otherwise for the demands of adulthood or the rigors of parenting. Many receive delayed prenatal care, or none at all, and consequently, their babies are born "at risk". More often than not they have no marketable job skills, no income, no health insurance, no appropriate housing, no high school diploma, and . . . no spouse. Their options are limited . . . most of them simply drop out of school and "go on welfare" . . . some of them are lured into prostitution or drug trafficking or some other illicit activity at the cost of their own future and that of their child . . . two human potentials are lost and another link in the chain of hopelessness and despair is forged.

AMERICA'S CHILDREN ARE EMOTIONALLY DISTURBED AND MENTALLY ILL

Marian Wright Edelman also reports that between 7.5 and 9.5 million American children have emotional problems severe enough to warrant mental health intervention. Of this number 70-80% fail to receive the services they need. Even the

majority of the 3 million or so children and adolescents who are seriously disturbed or mentally ill are unlikely to access appropriate treatment.[20] How well prepared do you suppose they will be to face the competition and demands of our complex society? We are talking about nearly 10 million children . . . *10 million* soon-to-be adults with uncertain futures.

AMERICA'S CHILDREN ARE NOT LEARNING . . .

Public education is an unparalleled American catastrophe. Nat Hentoff, author and journalist, in an article entitled "Anonymous Children" [21] portrays the overall educational system in America as one that is totally unable to prepare vast numbers of our children for even a moderate degree of self-sufficiency. There are literally millions of school-age children in this country. Yet, according to Mr. Hentoff, the national dropout rate is now conservatively estimated at 25% . . . one in every four American children will automatically be excluded from any possibility of entering the high-tech job market, regardless of how bright or talented that youngster may be . . . many of these children will be unprepared for even unskilled or part-time menial work. Shockingly, Hentoff also reports that in Boston (and no doubt others of our great American cities) the dropout rate is over 50% and the daily attendance rate is about the same. Even for those children who do stay in school, far too many graduate with totally inadequate life-achievement skills. Alarming numbers of our high school seniors are functionally illiterate . . . one fifth (23 million) of the nation's work force is unable to read above the 8th grade level although the cross section of American jobs requires reading comprehension at the 9th grade level. [22] In fact, over 50% of America's high school graduates are unable to read well enough to complete even moderately complex tasks and 80% have inadequate writing skills.[23] Many American youth lack even the most basic skills . . . they cannot make change for a dollar, tell time, read a street map, make a long distance phone call, read directions on an aspirin bottle, figure out a bus schedule, or fill out a job application . . . they cannot speak, read or write well enough to function in the mainstream of American life. The American public education system is a travesty.

Few poor children in America see education as a vehicle of escape from poverty . . . too few schools offer opportunity . . . even fewer offer hope. America's underclass children tend to live in economically poor neighborhoods and attend qualitatively poor

schools. Moreover, poor children are disproportionately disadvantaged educationally. The likelihood of falling behind academically is increased by 2% for every year a child lives in poverty.[24] Although it has been documented through formal studies, any casual, yet astute observer knows that schools in poor neighborhoods have higher dropout rates . . . and the cycle of poverty and ignorance and hopelessness and despair continues, uninterrupted into America's future.

SO WHAT CAN WE SAY ABOUT THE STATUS OF AMERICA'S CHILDREN? WE CAN SAY THAT:

- American children are the "poorest of the poor" . . . one in every five children in the United States lives in poverty, compared to one in seven Americans in general . . . and the penetrations of poverty are getting deeper and wider . . . *one in four* babies born in the United States is now born into poverty;

- American children are not safe . . . every year there are well over a million and a half children who suffer from neglect and/or physical, sexual and emotional abuse and that does not begin to measure the full extent of the problem;

- American children are paying the price for our involvement with drugs and alcohol . . . they are being physiologically and emotionally damaged by the hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions . . . many of our children are dying from the primary or secondary effects of drugs and alcohol;

- Life in America for black and other minority children is getting worse . . . they are being submerged deeper and deeper into the despair and hopelessness of America's underclass ... they are children without hope;

- American children are having children, 1 million of them . . . and the children of teen parents are born disadvantaged in almost every way from the day they are born;

- American children are emotionally disturbed and mentally ill . . . nearly 10 million of them and the vast majority of these children and adolescents do not receive adequate treatment;

- American school age children are not learning . . . they are not being prepared . . . one in four of our children drop out of school and far too many of those who don't are functionally illiterate, yet they, not we, are labeled failures.

By almost any possible yardstick, our success in preparing today's children for tomorrow's world has been dismal. Although certainly not all of our children fit the above scenario, the fact is that far too many of America's children do. Not only are they unprepared to meet even minimal expectations of self-sufficiency and productivity, they will be equally unable to prepare the next generation. We can no longer afford to close our eyes to the plight of our children. Their plight is our future, and it is nothing less than a national disaster . . . a total and complete disgrace . . . an unconscionable result of omission and commission.

THE PLIGHT OF OUR CHILDREN IS AMERICA'S APARTHEID . . .

OUR CHILDREN ARE SUFFERING FROM AN INFORMAL "POLICY" OF NATIONAL NEGLECT. EVERY DAY IN AMERICA, MILLIONS OF OUR CHILDREN ARE NOT BEING CARED FOR . . . THEY ARE NOT BEING KEPT SAFE . . . THEY ARE NOT BEING PREPARED. OUR CHILDREN ARE NOT PROSPERING PHYSICALLY, INTELLECTUALLY, EMOTIONALLY OR SPIRITUALLY. LITTLE BY LITTLE, DAY BY DAY, MILLIONS OF AMERI AN YOUTH ARE DYING BECAUSE WE ARE TAKING AWAY THEIR OPPORTUNITIES AND DREAMS . . . WE ARE ROBBING THEM OF THEIR ABILITY TO REACH THEIR POTENTIAL . . . WE ARE CRUSHING THEIR SPIRIT . . . AND *WE* ARE THE ENEMY.

THE PLIGHT OF OUR CHILDREN IS AMERICA'S FUTURE . . .

AMERICA'S CHILDREN: A PLEA FOR ENTITLEMENT

If we are willing to take an honest look at the plight of America's youth, we can reach but one conclusion; that it is nothing less than devastatingly bleak. America's children are poor, very poor . . . they are undereducated . . . they are disabled and emotionally disturbed and mentally ill . . . they are both victims and perpetrators of violent crimes . . . and they are abused, neglected and exploited. Our children are victimized by drugs and alcohol . . . they are parents of other children . . . they are homeless . . . they are hungry and angry and sad and without hope. By the millions, our children are being robbed of opportunity . . . they are being denied any possibility of reaching their potential.

Do our children have a right to expect better of us? Do they deserve more? Should they be entitled to an opportunity to reach their potential? The answer to these questions must be a resounding YES. We can afford no less for America's children . . . they are entitled to no less. Why not, we ask?

First, If we don't value and respect our children individually, we must, at least, consider their value collectively. If for no other reason we can no longer afford to squander our national human potential if we want to continue to be competitive players in the world marketplace. We Americans pride ourselves on being the best ... on coming in first . . . on being on the cutting edge. Instead, we are right on the brink of loosing it . . . we are living on the margin. We have little tolerance for second finishes . . . especially our own . . . and we have already lost the lead. **Selfish reason #1.**

Selfish reason #2. The U.S. population is getting older. According to Census Bureau projections, by the year 2050 there will be nearly 20 million more Americans over 60 years old than under 20.[25] Over the next two or three decades, the number of Americans in their peak years of earning and productivity will shrink, both in terms of actual numbers and in proportion to the total population. The burden on today's children, and tomorrow's, will surely increase as they are called upon to meet the growing financial and social demands of our country. Therefore, if we want to live comfortably in our old age, we must make sure our children are prepared to take good care of us.

Selfish reason #3. Whether this is really selfish or something else, you will have to decide. Nevertheless . . . we Americans preach to other countries loud and long about human rights and threaten to withhold billions of dollars in foreign aid as we openly accuse them of violations. We hold human rights right up there with God and country, the flag and apple pie. Pointing our finger at somebody else is a pretty clever strategy . . . because if those other countries took a good look at the children of America, we would be disgraced before the world.

Enough said about selfishness . . . let's move on to reality.

The U.S. Census Bureau projects that there will be approximately *146 million* Americans in their prime years of productivity (between age 20 and 60) by the year 2050.[26] It will be these 146 million "prime-timers" who will shoulder the primary responsibility for America's socioeconomic, political and spiritual health . . . they will be the country's greatest source of energy, talent, creativity and leadership . . . the primary producers of private and corporate income . . . and the heaviest contributors to an infinite variety of tax-supported government programs. By that same year, however, there will be nearly *154 million* Americans either under the age of 20 or over 60, nearly 25 million of whom will be over 80 years old.[27] It quickly becomes apparent that by the year 2050 there will be a smaller population of people upon whom a larger population will depend. Looking at it from that perspective, it should be clear that the demands upon these 146 million future Americans will be considerably greater than ever before.

But wait, we're talking about 146 million American "prime-timers" as if they're all going to be functional, self-sufficient, productive, taxpaying citizens. What will happen to that number when we reduce it by the millions of tomorrow's adults who are today's untreated emotionally disturbed and mentally ill children . . . and the millions of high school graduates who are functionally illiterate or those who simply drop out of school altogether . . . and the millions who carry lifelong scars of dysfunction because of physical and sexual abuse and chronic neglect? How many will be left when we reduce it by the number of youth who are victims of alcoholism and drug abuse . . . and those who are among the hundreds of thousands of America's "street people" . . . and all the rest of today's "throwaway" children . . . and tomorrow's? When we reduce the pool of potential "prime timers" by the growing

numbers who will leave childhood unprepared to care for themselves, much less others, that number will shrink . . . not by thousands, but by millions.

It's not a pretty picture, is it? Americans are getting older. The raw number of "prime-timers" is getting smaller and smaller and that number is being further reduced by a growing number of functionally disabled and dependent adults. As a result, sometime within the next 20 or 30 years or so, we will experience a significant shift in our socioeconomic ecosystem as *the number of essentially nonproductive, functionally dependent Americans of all ages will exceed the number of Americans upon whom they will realistically be able to depend.* At the same time, advances in applied science and technology will result in more high-tech jobs than ever before ... and fewer Americans will be prepared to fill them. Our Japanese, Western European and Southeast Asian neighbors, however, will provide stiff competition . . . and they *will* be prepared. Every year the demands upon Americans, both individually and collectively, will increase. How will our children, and our children's children survive in a society in which the "functionally dependent" outnumber all others?

Without profound and immediate interventions on virtually all fronts we will have created a society so out-of-balance that those who do manage to become functional, productive citizens will simply be overwhelmed by the burden of those who do not. Perhaps we should continue to bury our heads in the sand . . . to ignore the obvious . . . most of us probably won't be around in 50 or 60 years anyway. But those of us who will bear children within the next ten years, or who will see our grandchildren born during that time, must concede that it will be *our* children and *our* grandchildren who will be the *first* to suffer the consequences of our selfishness and arrogance. They will either be among the burden-carriers of the 21st century . . . the caregivers, the producers, the problem-solvers and the supporters of costly government programs . . . or they will be among the millions of "functional dependents" who will have slipped hopelessly into the depths of America's permanent underclass. Either way, it is an awful, terrible thing to do to those we are about to bring into this world . . . it is a selfish, unconscionable legacy . . . it is a disgraceful mark to leave on humanity at a time when we should be doing everything possible to maximize and mobilize our national and global human potential. To be sure, we can ill afford to sacrifice even one of our children . . . it would be absurd to think that we can continue to sacrifice them by the millions.

There should be little doubt in any thinking person's mind that we must do everything to save our children and that we must DO IT NOW. While we claim to be one of the richest, most advanced countries in the world, our children are not even being accorded basic human rights. How can this be? What's happened to us? Where's our sense of responsibility? . . . our commitment to our children? Aren't they entitled to a better legacy? . . . a better world?

Certainly our children are entitled to better. And so we speak, more rhetorically than anything else, about children's rights and entitlements. Is there a difference, we might ask. Good point . . . what *is* the difference? Unfortunately, the dictionary is of little help, so let me offer up my own unofficial working definition that will allow us to make a useful distinction. Generally, it seems we think of rights as privileges uniformly granted to members of a class of people so long as they carry out certain responsibilities and don't violate the rights of others. Rights can be exercised or not at the choosing of the individual who has them. For instance, those of us who are U S. citizens and over the age of 18 are accorded the right to vote in public elections. But that's not all there is to it. We must also assume certain responsibilities . . . like registering to vote and showing up at the polls on election day. We can choose to vote . . . or we can elect not to. Furthermore, our rights can be taken away. If we are convicted of a crime and put in jail, chances are we'll lose our civil rights . . . and if that happens, we lose our right to vote. So rights are tenuous . . . to get them, we must belong to an eligible class . . . then to use them, we must carry out certain responsibilities . . . and most importantly, to keep them, we must mind our "P's and Q's" or whoever gave them to us will take them away. Rights are not necessarily for keeps.

Entitlements are another story. It seems that entitlements are privileges or guarantees that are granted to members of a class with no strings attached. If we belong to the class, we have automatic access . . . automatic claim. We can choose to cash in on things to which we are entitled, or we can choose not to, but nobody has the authority to take them away from us . . . regardless of our "P's & Q's." As long as we are members of the class, we are entitled . . . period . . . that's all there is to it. In my mind, there is a big difference between rights and entitlements. Rights, being related to responsibilities, are tenuous . . . entitlements are not, they are for keeps.

Historically, the United States is well grounded in the concept of rights. The U.S. Constitution, which has governed our country for the past 200 or more years, spells out the fundamental rights, liberties, and freedoms which are guaranteed to all law-abiding American citizens. For the most part, however, there are far fewer Constitutional rights applicable to the unique status of children than there are to the specific interests of adults. Perhaps this is more than simple oversight as there is a fundamental and purposeful correlation between rights and responsibilities. Because children are dependent upon others for their physical, emotional and spiritual development, however, they are not in a position to exercise adult responsibilities in order to lay claim to their rights and protections. Our children, therefore, should be freed from obligation . . . their guarantees should be extended with no strings attached . . . they should not be denied opportunities as children that would limit their ability to reach their potential as adults. Therefore, it should be obvious that, Constitutional rights notwithstanding, **OUR CHILDREN MUST BE AMONG THE ENTITLED** . . . simply because they belong to a class defined by childhood.

If we are willing to buy into the notion that children should be among the entitled, what then, should they be entitled to? As we look at the dismal circumstance of America's children, we cannot help but acknowledge the sheer and utter waste of human potential that is the result of our negligence. Our country, and in fact the whole world, is being deprived of the collective talent, intellect, creativity and leadership of millions of our youth. But what we are wasting collectively, is the squander of our children individually. Simply put *we must have a formal, written social and economic policy that endorses and operationalizes the notion that EACH AND EVERY CHILD IS ENTITLED TO AN OPPORTUNITY TO REACH HIS OR HER FULL POTENTIAL . . . AN OPPORTUNITY FOR SELF-ACTUALIZATION.* Anything less is neither reasonable nor moral.

Only when the potential of every one of our children is within reach can we pride ourselves on our humanitarian values . . . can we talk human rights to the rest of the world. But how might we begin to implement such a policy? Maslow's "hierarchy of needs" provides a useful framework for our purposes. According to Maslow, the ultimate expression of our existence is the achievement of our full potential . . . self-actualization. The ability to reach that goal, however, is dependent upon the satisfaction of a hierarchy of human needs from the most basic ones of physical survival up through the more intangible ones associated with cognitive, emotional and

spiritual well-being. It might be helpful if we were to visualize each step in the hierarchy, each need, as a child entitlement. In other words, all children should be entitled to have their basic needs met by the society in which they live in a hierarchical manner so that each and every child is ultimately guaranteed the opportunity to achieve self-actualization.

As an initial step in the process of guaranteeing opportunities for self-actualization, we must first be able to satisfy the basic *physiological needs* of *all* children. That means we must conquer poverty in America . . . we must eliminate hunger and homelessness . . . we must provide quality prenatal care, medical care and child care for our children. We must assure their health, comfort and survival. Achieving this initial step will, perhaps, be the greatest and most critical challenge we will face.

We must also meet our children's *need for security* . . . we must give them faith in a personal future . . . we must protect them and keep them safe. They can have no hope of reaching their potential as long as they continue to be victims of abuse, neglect, sexual assault, exploitation, substance abuse, disease and domestic and community violence.

We must meet the *social needs* of our children . . . we must give them a sense of belonging, an assurance of our love and affection. Far too many of our children are brought into a world of deprivation, isolation and hopelessness from the very first day of life. George E. Will, in an April 1990 Newsweek article, explores one of the reasons for the "intergenerational transmission of poverty". According to Will's article, young mothers who were themselves born into the emotional and social emptiness of poverty, are likely to have a "barren 'inner world' of imagination and emotional energy" which interferes with their ability to form attachments to their babies. As a result, their children show observable signs of bewilderment, depression and withdrawal, and subsequently become "crippled" in their social, emotional and intellectual development . . . a result that appears to last a lifetime.[28]

The final prerequisite to self-actualization is *positive self-worth*. We must value our children, however, before they can value themselves. They must develop an "unconditional positive regard" for themselves and we must help them to do it. If we adults have no other role, if society has no other mission, if human service no other

measure of its success, it must be to provide each and every child optimal opportunity to reach his/her full potential.

We are not lacking in knowledge . . . we know what's going on with our children. *We are not lacking in recommendations* . . . there are many, Marian Wright Edelman and Ann Rosewater, just to name two, who have studied the plight of our children and developed sound strategies for change. *What we are lacking is an individual and collective national commitment to improve the status of our children* and insure the spiritual, economic and political future of our country. We are able, talented and successful people . . . AND WE CAN DO IT.

BUT TIME IS RUNNING OUT. Many scholars believe that the Mayans of pre-Columbian Central America were perhaps the greatest, most advanced and most knowledgeable people ever to have lived on this planet. There are those who say these ancient people long ago predicted our history and our future . . . that they believed the earth is completing a 5000 year cycle which will end in the year 2012 . . . that during our human history we have abandoned our humanitarian and spiritual values and created serious disharmony with our universe . . . and that we have only until the year 2012 to straighten ourselves out.[29] Poppycock! . . . what did these ancient people know about today's world? Certainly we have more than 22 years to do something. Certainly we haven't lost sight of our humanitarian and spiritual values. Certainly we wouldn't put our own selfish interests before those of our children. Certainly *we* are not the enemy of our own youth. Surely not . . . but if we not the enemy, then we must be a much better friend . . . much better indeed.

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